

Letter to the Editor

P.W.J. Bartrip's Attack on Irving J. Selikoff

To the Editor:

The *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* recently published an article, P.W. Bartrip's 'Irving John Selikoff and the Strange Case of the Missing Medical Degrees,' that attacked one of this century's foremost advocates of worker health [Bartrip, 2003]. When we submitted this letter in response, it was rejected by that journal (which did, however, print two responses to Bartrip, as well as Bartrip's own reply to these) [Cooper and Chromow, 2004; Greenberg, 2004; Bartrip, 2004]. The journal subsequently refused to publish photographic evidence of Selikoff's MD diploma. Ironically, that journal saw fit to publish on a "missing" degree, but apparently did not find documentation of that degree to be print-worthy. We resubmit our critique of Bartrip here.

Bartrip's article makes the outrageous claim that Irving Selikoff was not a legitimate spokesperson with regard to the science and public policy of occupational disease in general and asbestos in particular. In the end, Bartrip's article is little more than an ad hominem attack on one of the greatest advocates of worker and public health in the 20th century.

In considering the merit of 'new' charges that Irving Selikoff achieved medical acclaim by masquerading behind false credentials, the critical reader must be mindful of the context of the attack. Dr. Selikoff was on the leading edge of a challenge to the asbestos industry, whose products were used by millions of workers and householders daily. He was the most prominent public health advocate at every level of information and regulation: organizing medical conferences, giving frequent news interviews, testifying in Congressional and regulatory hearings, and collaborating with governmen-

tal and academic researchers. He challenged the use of sprayed asbestos inside massive buildings under construction in New York and other cities. He worked tirelessly with unions, environmental groups, scientists, lawyers, governmental officials, and politicians all over the world. Dr. Selikoff epitomized the committed public health professional. He was at home confronting industrial interests at every level; spoke in fluent sound bites on television; saw the workers and advised them; and also had the aplomb to invite industrial executives to come to meetings on asbestos and support needed research. He founded medical societies and journals that altered the balance of power in toxic substances control.

Bartrip caricatures Selikoff. The latter was not always as hostile to the asbestos industry as Bartrip suggests, nor was Selikoff alone or primarily responsible for the demise of that industry [Selikoff, 1970; Selikoff and Lee, 1978].¹ However, it is true that by the early 1970s Selikoff and the asbestos industry were on a collision course. Britain's flagship asbestos firm, Turner & Newall, despaired at how:

Dr. Selikoff bestrides the US asbestos and health situation like a colossus. Our impression was that most of the top management at Johns-Manville had no clear idea how to deal with him or the problems created by his statements. A curious air of despondency existed and the general feeling was that nobody, apart from Dr. Selikoff, was listened to when questions about asbestos and health were raised [Holmes, 1970].

The asbestos industry had good reason to be defensive. It had known of the mineral's dangers for decades, yet had endeavored to hide that knowledge from the public. In the early 1970s, as millions of Americans were finally becoming aware of the deadly effects of asbestos, the industry continued to sell asbestos despite its increasingly publicized health effects. In 1973, the same year asbestos use in the US

*Correspondence to: David Egilman, MD, MPH, Clinical Associate Professor, Brown University Department of Community Medicine, 8 North Main Street, Suite 404, Attleboro, MA 02703. E-mail: degilman@egilman.com

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¹ Selikoff once deplored the 'demonological theory of industrial hygiene history' and refused to indict the asbestos industry for 'trading human health for profits.'

reached its zenith (over 800,000 metric tons), the courts established the precedent for asbestos liability suits [Virta, 2003; *Borel v. Fibreboard Paper Prods. Co.*, 1974]. Faced with the threat of mass litigation, the asbestos magnates marshaled enormous resources to investigate Dr. Selikoff as relentlessly as the FBI ever investigated Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Recognizing the effect that Selikoff's work had on public opinion, the industry sought to discredit him as a physician and as a scientist [Asbestos Textile Institute, 1971]. Legal discovery in US asbestos litigation has exposed glimpses of how this campaign was orchestrated through companies such as Johns-Manville and their lobbying agencies, such as the Asbestos Information Association.

Yet Selikoff's antagonists came up with nothing to discredit him in his lifetime, and he continued to be the leading American figure in the world struggle for worker protection until he died in 1992. Since his death, although others have continued his work (e.g., through the Collegium Ramazzini, which he helped found), no one has matched his panache and public profile. Meanwhile, the asbestos industry has been almost universally reviled. The mineral is now virtually banned in most of the developed world. The subject of Bartrip's authorized company history—Turner & Newall—was absorbed by US company Federal Mogul [Tweedale, 2000; Bartrip, 2001].² Both are now in bankruptcy proceedings over asbestos liabilities, alongside virtually all the other US asbestos manufacturers. Congress is considering legislation to resolve an "elephantine mass" of asbestos cases in the courts. Given this context, we have several concerns about the content of Bartrip's article, which we address below.

Dr. Selikoff's Education and Licensing

Bartrip spends many pages discrediting the institutions at which Dr. Selikoff obtained his medical training. Bartrip's critiques of Anderson's College (AC) and Middlesex University School of Medicine (MSUM) may be accurate, but are beside the point. The quality of the training institute certainly has some overall impact on the quality of doctors it produces. But even if Bartrip is right in his estimation of AC and MUSM, then Dr. Selikoff is the exception that proves the rule. Dr. Selikoff's many publications, honors, and awards stand as testimony to his skill as a physician as well as an advocate. That he attained such skills under less-than-ideal training conditions should be a source of admiration rather than criticism.

Bartrip also implies that the "triple qualification" that Dr. Selikoff received in 1945 was an inferior degree to the MD. Notwithstanding this argument, the triple qualification

did authorize its bearers (as Bartrip agrees) to practice medicine. Bartrip acknowledges that Dr. Selikoff passed this examination in 1945, and recognizes that obtaining the triple qualification allowed Dr. Selikoff to obtain a license to practice medicine in the US.³ Bartrip does not explain that Dr. Selikoff was, in fact, licensed to practice in both New York and New Jersey [Selikoff, 1967]. Bartrip's concern with the quality of the institutions attended by Dr. Selikoff seems frivolous at best. The fact remains that the doctor completed a course of study which was duly recognized by contemporary license-granting authorities and qualified him to be admitted to practice at two hospitals early in his career.⁴ Selikoff went on to pursue what can only be characterized as a highly successful medical and research career.

A perhaps more serious charge is that Dr. Selikoff was a "fraud," who deliberately misrepresented his degree. But Bartrip ignores the fact that the MD and the TQ represented equivalent degrees, and criticizes Dr. Selikoff for using the wrong initials after his name. It is quite likely that if this was the case, Dr. Selikoff did this to avoid confusion, as the TQ is not a popularly recognized degree in the US. It certainly does not rise to the level of fraud or misrepresentation since it is clear that Dr. Selikoff completed a course of study equivalent to the medical degree. However, this entire line of argument has been proven unnecessary. Cooper and Chromow's response to Bartrip's article revealed that Bartrip got the basic facts wrong. Selikoff received an MD degree from MUSM, and there is photographic evidence to prove it (Figure 1).

Overall, Bartrip's fixation on Dr. Selikoff's training has much in common with the industry executives, lawyers, and PR people who mounted an attack on Dr. Selikoff while he was living. While Dr. Selikoff is now dead, his work still has a vital effect on current asbestos litigation and legislation. Bartrip's piece will certainly be used to shore up industry positions in both these arenas.

The Quality of Dr. Selikoff's Work

Any historian writing on Dr. Selikoff would be forced, as Bartrip is, to acknowledge his "hundreds of articles and several books . . . the widespread recognition accorded [his] achievements . . . [and] the honorary degrees, awards, and medals that came his way" [Bartrip, 2003]. But Bartrip

² For a more critical account of T&N, see Geoffrey Tweedale, *Magic mineral to killer dust: Turner & Newall and the asbestos hazard*.

³ Bartrip's discussion of the triple qualification and its relationship to licensure in the US is unclear and confusing. On page 13 he writes, "In 1939, while Dr. Selikoff was still studying at Anderson's, the New York and New Jersey Boards of Examiners announced their intention to cease recognizing the triple qualification," but a footnote on that page adds that "the decision . . . did not apply to students already enrolled." On page 25, discussing Dr. Selikoff's date of licensure, Bartrip obliquely informs us that it was Dr. Selikoff's obtaining of the TQ that allowed him to be licensed.

⁴ Selikoff was admitted to practice at Barnert Memorial Hospital in 1960 and Sea View (Staten Island) in 1954.

A



B

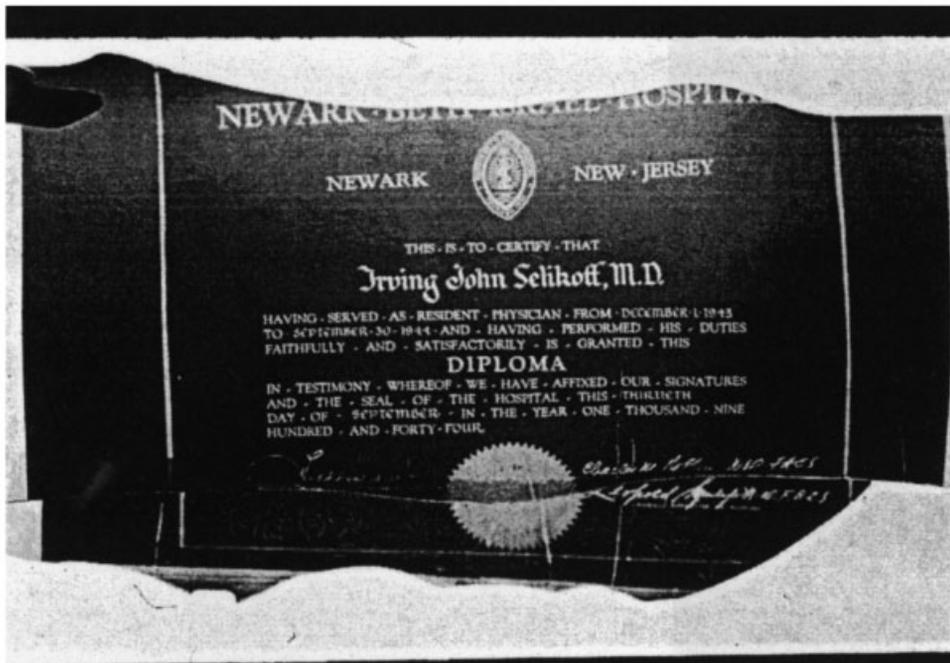


FIGURE 1. These photographs of damaged but legible negatives clearly show that Dr. Selikoff received a Doctor of Medicine degree from Middlesex University in November 1943 and that Newark Beth Israel Hospital recognized his MD during his residency there. The image is provided courtesy of Robert Cooper and Deb Chromow. Ms. Chromow's father, Dr. Bernard Chromow, was a companion of Dr. Selikoff during the years in which they pursued their medical education.

follows this with a sly innuendo. After accurately stating that Dr. Selikoff's articles "have never been disputed by serious scholars," he continues, "however, many of his scientific papers and books were co-authored. When he wrote alone, it

was often to produce less technical, often more polemical work. Consequently, questions do arise about the extent to which Dr. Selikoff, as opposed to his co-authors, was responsible for the scientific output" [emphasis added].

This argument is flimsy at best. Research in the sciences (as opposed to “more polemical work”) is almost always conducted by teams, so it is hardly unusual that Dr. Selikoff would have one or more co-authors on the majority of his work. Dr. Selikoff was the primary author on the 1964–65 articles that Bartrip calls “path-breaking.” Dr. Selikoff clearly shared responsibility for “scientific output” with his co-authors. Any suggestion to the contrary is speculation grounded in bias rather than historical research. Bartrip—a non-scientist—hardly strikes us as the most qualified scholar to assess Selikoff’s scientific work. Why couldn’t he find a single scientific peer critique to cite?

Dr. Selikoff’s Alleged Role in the World Trade Center Collapse

Incredibly, Bartrip implies that Dr. Selikoff was somehow responsible for the collapse of the World Trade Center—an accusation that is neither good history nor good industrial hygiene. Two kinds of fireproofing in the Towers were sold by US Minerals, one containing asbestos, one not. Both products were tested by Underwriters’ Laboratories and had the same fireproofing rating.⁵ That is, one was as good as the other. Furthermore, the ban on spray asbestos in New York City, for which Dr. Selikoff could proudly claim credit, did not go into effect until 1972, after almost all of the construction had been completed. In any case, no fireproofing could have withstood the trauma inflicted by a fully-fuelled 767 travelling at over 500 miles per hour.

Curiously, for the author of a book and two articles on Turner & Newall (T&N), Bartrip neglects to tell his readers why Dr. Selikoff was so concerned about spraying. Well before the WTC was constructed, spraying had a deplorable health record and even T&N—its inventor—admitted (confidentially) that the process exposed sprayers and everyone around them to “high concentrations of asbestos dust” [Problems of Asbestosis Prevention... & Suggested Code of Practice, 1965]. T&N withdrew it themselves in the UK in 1974, without any intervention by Selikoff.

The Usefulness of Historians to Industry

According to Bartrip’s testimony in a recent court action [Deposition of Peter William John Bartrip, 2003], he visited the Johns-Manville archive at the behest of lawyers associated with AC&S, a defendant asbestos company. The archive is cited frequently in the Selikoff article. We are

⁵ It is also important to note that asbestos was not used in products for its heat resistant properties alone. It served as a binder in pipe covering and was used in spray insulation partly because of its ability to allow for a smooth flow through the hose. But mineral wool also retarded fire. In fact, treated cellulose (paper) can also serve as a substitute for asbestos in fireproofing applications without any loss of efficiency.

puzzled that, in an article that castigates a distinguished physician for supposedly not presenting all the facts, this ‘interest’ was not declared.

Bartrip’s clear pro-industry stance in this article, combined with his authorized history on T&N, raises important questions about the relationship of historians to industrial interests. In recent years, industries around the country have begun to seek out historians who can prove useful in lawsuits. *The New York Times*, in a recent article, identifies a number of historians, including the President of the American Association for the History of Medicine (a physician), who have testified for the tobacco, lead, paint, asbestos, and even soda companies [Cohen, 2003].

For some historians, particularly historians of medicine, the fact that members of the profession are being recruited to write histories of toxic polluters and advise on lawsuits is especially troubling [Cantor, 1992]. Litigation and historical research have revealed that the tobacco, lead, and asbestos industries (among others) have long had knowledge of the toxic effects of the products they sell. Prima facie documentary evidence of industry manipulation of research, concealment of dangers, and suppression of reports has won these three substances a place in the historians’ rogues gallery. For years these and other industries have been seeking to hire respectable historians to defend themselves from lawsuits based on documentary evidence from their own files. Industry has long used expert medical testimony to create uncertainty about causation and even diagnosis in liability cases. Historians can fulfil a similar function for industry lawyers if they present an “alternative reality” that creates confusion and uncertainty for judges, juries, and plaintiffs. We have no doubt that Bartrip’s article will be read with great interest by those same lawyers.

We cannot help but be reminded of German physician Rudolf (Carl) Virchow’s statement from another century: “Medicine is a social science and politics [is] nothing but medicine on a grand scale...” [quoted in Ackerknecht, 1981], Dr. Selikoff understood this maxim and knew that the truth about the devastating effect of asbestos on workers would attract political attacks. But he also believed, as did Virchow, that he could not shrink from this responsibility, and that “doctors are the natural advocates of the poor, and social problems are largely within their jurisdiction.”¹⁴ This is in fact the admirably humane legacy that a responsible and truthful article on Dr. Selikoff would have documented.

David Egilman, MD, MPH*
Brown University Department of Community Medicine
Providence, Rhode Island 02912

Geoffrey Tweedale, BA, MSc, PhD
Centre for Business History
Manchester Metropolitan University Business School
Manchester, U.K.

Jock McCulloch, PhD
School of Social Science and Planning
RMIT University
Melbourne, Australia

William Kovarik, PhD
Media Studies
Radford University
Radford, Virginia 24142

Barry Castleman, PhD
Environmental Consultant
Garrett Park, MD 20896

William Longo, PhD
Materials Analytical Services Inc.
Suwanee, Georgia 30024

Stephen Levin, MD
Mount Sinai School of Medicine
New York, New York 10029

Susanna Rankin Bohme, AM
Brown University Department of American Civilization
Providence, Rhode Island 02912

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